



Covid 19 – Non-Food Enrichment for Dogs

Meeting a dog's physical, mental and emotional needs can be challenging for caregivers who are self-isolating, and when exercise opportunities are limited due to current pandemic restrictions. However, the following are non-food ideas to meet these needs under current restrictions. Please also see the FABC food enrichment handout.

All dogs are individuals, and many have natural preferences for the types of activities they like to engage with. Some dogs may have physical traits or medical conditions which mean certain activities are difficult or uncomfortable for them. Please consider any limitations your dog has before selecting their activities. To understand more about their natural preferences for activities, give them a variety of these and allow your dog to show you their preferences. Monitor your dog's arousal levels when engaging in activities. If they get too excited, take a break or do some calm reward-based training with them.

Dogs should be supervised when engaged in activities. Toys and other resources should be of an appropriate size (so that they are not a choke hazard) and they should be regularly inspected to ensure that they remain safe. If your dog shows aggression around resources, do not attempt the following ideas and instead seek advice from a Clinical Animal Behaviourist registered with the ABTC (<http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/>).

Toys

Dogs sometimes become bored of toys if the same ones are always available. Try rotating your dog's toys by splitting them into several carrier bags and using a different set each day so that they remain novel and interesting. Also introduce completely new toys to them. For example, roll up an old towel or tea towel and tie a knot in the centre of this, so that it can be used as a soft toy to be carried or tug toy. Give your dog an empty plastic bottle with the lid removed, if safe for them. If your dog has favourite toys, these should always be available.

While your dog is playing with a particular toy, teach them the name of this by saying 'ball' for example. Be consistent and soon your dog should associate the word with the toy. Then ask your dog to pick this up by saying the name 'ball', before praising your dog for doing as asked. Then do that with several other toys over a few days (ensure that the names of toys sound quite different). Then ensure all these toys are accessible and ask your dog to fetch specific ones – as part of a toy identity parade!

Tug games

Tug can be a great game as long as your dog knows the rules for this from the offset. Before playing this, ensure that your dog is successful with 'take it' and 'leave it' cues, so that this can be played safely. Regularly allow your dog to 'win' the item, and then engage them in another fun game of tug when they return this to you. If your dog works their mouth up the toy and makes contact with your hand, drop the toy and walk away. This is so that your dog learns that using their mouth appropriately results in more fun,



Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians



whereas using their mouth inappropriately has boring outcomes. If your dog needs some help calming down after a tug game, direct them onto a calming chew activity or rewarding training session.

Search games

Teach your dog to find a hidden toy. To do this, place them behind a stairgate or ask someone else in your home to gently hold their collar; then whilst your dog watches, hide the toy under an upturned plant pot, cup or other item which they can easily knock over. Allow your dog to approach, and as they sniff and paw the pot, praise them and turn the pot over if necessary. Then add a second empty pot and allow your dog to show you (by sniffing and pawing) the pot which has the item inside. Again, praise them when they get this right. Then add a third pot and repeat this as your dog becomes familiar with this new game. If your dog chooses the wrong pot, don't respond. This game can then be varied so that it is done with various toys and pots, and in various parts of the home and/or garden.

To play 'hide and seek' with your dog, wait until they are not paying attention to you and then slip behind a large piece of furniture or a garden tree, before calling their name. When your dog finds you, reward this success by praising them and engaging them in a toy game.

Destruction



Many dogs love to chew or destroy items. A range of non-food chews are available for dogs, including moulded plastic (i.e. Nylabone®), Kong's® and commercial tree roots. Chews should be carefully selected, as there can be risks associated with choking and splintering. Dogs should be supervised when they have access to a chew. Anything that is brittle and can splinter, or where there is risk of choke-sized pieces breaking away, should be removed.

Dogs can also be given cardboard to chew and destroy, although this should only be given in small quantities for dogs that consume this. Consider kitchen or toilet roll cardboard or cardboard boxes (with staples, sticky paper and other hazards removed). Cardboard boxes can contain high-value toys, or shredded paper / balls of waste paper and toys.

Digging

Many dogs love to dig, but this is often not welcome in our gardens. Instead, if you have a garden, set aside a designated digging area. This could be a size-appropriate sandpit, large bucket or wooden crate without splinters. If this is tall or not sturdy, submerge it in the ground. This can then contain non-toxic soil or sand. You can encourage your dog to dig for buried 'treasure'. To do this, show them a toy that they like, and then partially bury this in the digging pit. As your dog becomes skilled with finding their treasure, bury this deeper.

Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians



Fetch

For fetch games indoors or in the garden, choose an appropriately-sized ball, soft toy or Frisbee and throw and allow your dog to chase it. When they pick this up, call them back and praise them for returning, before throwing this again. If your dog is reluctant to return to you with the toy, introduce this game under calm circumstances and initially just drop the toy and encourage your dog to give it back to you (using praise and/or high-value food treats). Then do this with you gently tossing the toy away from you at gradually-increasing distances. If your dog is reluctant to release the toy, encourage this by having several identical or equal-value toys and throw one in the opposite direction as soon as the first toy is picked up.

Find it

Make 'find it' training easy initially, by placing your dog behind a stairgate or asking someone else in your home to gently hold their collar. Show your dog their toy and stay in sight whilst you hide this behind a cushion or piece of household/garden furniture. Your dog should then be released to find the item. Say 'find it' as your dog searches for this, and praise them when they find it. Practise this by hiding the toy in various areas which will be easy for your dog to find, and don't move onto more challenging areas until your dog is successful at this level.

This training can be used to the advantage of caregivers, by being made into a 'where are my keys' game, for example. The principles for this are the same as described above, apart from the keys should be made very easy for your dog to pick up (you may need to attach a soft item to the key chain), and you should introduce a specific cue such as 'find my keys'. Make this easy initially, but gradually more challenging over time.

Training

Toys can be given as training rewards for exercises which your dog is already familiar with (i.e. 'sit' or 'stay') through to newly-introduced cues and exercises. Training sessions should initially be short and in areas with minimal distractions. Training should always be 'good fun' for both the dog and their caregiver, and dogs should be set up to succeed. Please refer to dog training resources, including online ones, developed by members of the Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians, or of those registered as Animal Training Instructors with the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (<http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/>).



Indoor or garden obstacle course

Agility or obstacle courses can be introduced in the home or garden, in a calm manner to encourage focus. Plan an obstacle course based on items you already own – these could be chairs or table legs to go under or weave around, a blanket draped over a garden or coffee table as a tunnel, a broom handle (propped on a small stack of books or bricks either end) to create a mini-jump, a hula-hoop for jumping through, obstacles to weave around and a mat for sitting on. Decide on a sensible layout for these which allow your dog to move around them comfortably, away from breakable items or hazards. Then introduce your dog to each piece of equipment individually, by luring them to use these using a food or toy treat. Make this good

Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians



fun and praise your dog for succeeding. Then introduce two elements of your obstacle course (that will naturally flow) together; then a third element etc. Only add the extra elements as your dog has consistently mastered the previous stage.

Water games



Many dogs enjoy water, although be prepared for them to have a good shake if offering them water resources! Experiment with offering your dog a shallow washing up bowl or basin on the floor, and then allowing them to dip their paws, nose or head in this. Float one of your dogs toys (a size that they can pick up) or non-hazardous sized ice cubes in the water and then allow them to retrieve the item. If they are familiar with a 'find it' or similar cue, use this.

If you have a garden and your dog enjoys water, consider providing them with a water-filled sandpit or robust paddling pool. Toys or ice cubes can be placed in this. If your dog is cautious of the water, start off with this very shallow and then gradually increase the depth as your dogs confidence grows. Some dogs also enjoy running through garden sprinklers.

Please note: Some dogs will need to be gently towel dried after getting wet. Be aware that if you encourage your dog to use a paddling pool, they will not understand if you do not want them to use this if children are using it, for example. Please therefore be consistent regarding if they are or aren't allowed to use this.

Novelty, novelty, novelty!

As well as enjoying a predictable routine, many dogs enjoy an element of novelty when it comes to enrichment. Please therefore regularly introduce novel enrichment, and rotate the activities that they enjoy. Always ensure that your dog has opportunity to rest throughout the day, in addition to them engaging in stimulating activities at times.

© Deborah Fry BSc (Hons) MSc CCAB / Written by Deborah Fry BSc (Hons) MSc CCAB